

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 13, 2020

The Honorable Peter J. Visclosky
Chairman
Subcommittee on Defense
House Committee on Appropriations
H-405 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ken Calvert
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
House Committee on Appropriations
H-405 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Visclosky and Ranking Member Calvert:

We are writing to respectfully request the inclusion of robust funding, as well as corresponding report language, for the Health Professions Scholarship Program, government civilian compensation, and Special and Incentive Pays in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Defense Appropriations legislation, specifically for the recruitment and retention of mental health providers to support U.S. servicemembers and their families.

Over the past decade, more than two million Americans have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and increasing numbers of servicemembers are returning home with complex mental and behavioral health challenges. In recent years, Department of Defense (DoD) reports have shown significantly higher rates of suicide and suicidal ideation for servicemembers and their families. It is apparent that there is a stigma around seeking care for mental health issues, which prevents servicemembers from seeking the help they need. In order to break that stigma, we must normalize mental health care by ensuring it is as routine and accessible as any other form of healthcare. To that end, Congress must equip the Department with adequate resources to recruit and retain mental health providers.

More lucrative salaries in private practice, particularly for psychiatrists, and stressors unique to the military (i.e., deployments, embedded service, overseas duty, continuous moves, etc.), for the active duty providers, are commonly cited as primary challenges in recruitment and retention of a high-quality military mental health workforce. Additionally, in the case of civilian psychology positions in military treatment facilities, the DoD routinely attempts to hire psychologists at low General Schedule (GS) grades which are not competitive with other government agencies or private practice salaries.

The DoD identified the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP) as an effective recruitment tool for attracting mental health providers. The HPSP was established, in part, for the purpose of obtaining adequate numbers of commissioned officers on active duty who are qualified as a health professional with specific skills to assist in providing mental health care to servicemembers and their families. Increasing the number of scholarships for mental health programs would expand the training pipeline for high quality mental health providers.

The DoD GS grades for many clinical psychology positions are not commensurate with the required level of education and earning potential of psychologists, creating a situation where DoD cannot compete with other government agencies or private practice. Increasing GS grades would attract a high quality civilian workforce and serve to retain them over the long term.

A 2017 RAND report identified options to increase targeted retention rates of mental health providers, after they complete initial service obligations for commissioning or education. The report projected that increasing Special and Incentive Pays would increase retention rates, thus decreasing the number of accessions needed to meet demand. Retention is as equally critical as recruitment and is a vital factor in improving access and capacity of mental health care for military personnel, not to mention the importance of maintaining the most experienced providers in the workforce. Incentive pay is especially critical. As an example, while the retention bonus increased two years ago for military psychologists willing to sign up for six additional years, this is predicated on promotion cycles and thus is not equally distributed, even for those psychologists who are willing to commit to longer terms of service. The incentive pay on the other hand has not increased in over ten years, and this would significantly assist in motivating active duty psychologists to remain in the military.

We request that you include the following as report language in the FY21 Defense Appropriations bill:

Mental Health Providers - The Committee remains concerned about the shortage of current and prospective mental health care professionals for servicemembers and their families, including social workers, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists. The Committee urges the Department to review how the Health Professions Scholarship Program can be expanded to increase the number of mental health-related scholarships granted, with the goal of increasing the pipeline of mental health providers. The Committee also highly recommends the Department increase GS paygrades for mental health providers working in military treatment facilities. Last, the Committee urges the Department to prioritize increasing Special and Incentive Pays to maximize the retention of active duty mental health providers, ensuring robust, high-quality military mental health care.

We urge you to support robust funding for mental health providers through the Health Professions Scholarship Program, GS paygrades for civilian mental health providers, and Special and Incentive Pays. Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



SETH MOULTON
Member of Congress



MICHAEL WALTZ
Member of Congress

Additional Cosigners

MICHAEL R. TURNER
Member of Congress

CHRISSY HOULAHAN
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